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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [BO](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: RUSSIA - BELARUS RELATIONS: VIEWS FROM SMOLENSK

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. Reasons 1.4(B/D).

¶1. (C) Summary. For Smolensk residents, Belarus spells shared history, friendly ties, the only path to Europe, and affordable goods. In their eyes, union with Belarus would be a plus. For the diehard communists, Belarus is what Russia could still be, while for others it is a backward, anti-democratic state with which Russia has no option but to continue a cooperative relationship. Officials deny any connection between the Smolensk region and opposition forces in Belarus. While acknowledging that Belarus opposition pamphlets were printed in Smolensk, money, not a desire to topple Lukashenko, was the driving force. Despite direct transport links, bilateral trade between the Smolensk and Belarus remained insignificant at USD 450 million in 2007. Smolensk's new governor has put more focus on the region's ties with Belarus and hopes to increase cooperation. End summary.

Between Moscow and Belarus

¶2. (C) FM Lavrov's late January visit to Minsk and President Putin's early February meeting with Lukashenko stirred speculation of an "impending" Union State. MFA officials excluded the possibility of such a dramatic move in the near future. From the vantage point of Smolensk, the border is artificial, dividing "one" people into two. Head of the region's External Economic Relations Department Sergey Kudryatsev underlined Belarus's importance to Smolensk as a window to Europe, and as a source of cheap produce in the absence of the region's agricultural sector, which was ruined during the '90s. The region's USD 250 million imports from Belarus comprised dairy, agricultural and textile products. Some thought that the region could further benefit from its "golden" location by insisting that Moscow pay it a transit fee for gas.

No Haven for Belarus Opposition

¶3. (C) Interlocutors dismissed press reports that Smolensk provided a haven for the Belarus opposition. Sergey Kovalyov, journalist, said that the population was so apolitical that it could not even get excited about its own political process let alone Belarus's. Smolensk's Mikhailov Printing House, he contended, was so cash-starved that it would print any material in order to stay afloat.

Communists: Belarus Wannabes

¶4. (C) For Communist Party leader Valeriy Kuznetsov, Belarus is what Russia could still be, with its leader firmly standing up against the U.S. and the West. With "bandit capitalism" Russian-style in full swing and the "capitalists" from Moscow buying premium real estate in Smolensk, Belarus's

"orderly" economy looked attractive in contrast. Kuznetsov argued that Lukashenko was a model statesman who, Putin feared, would be elected president if a union state were created. Kuznetsov stressed that the slow pace toward the Union State was evidence that Putin dreaded competition.

One People, One History

15. (C) Nataliya Bondarenko, Editor-in-Chief for the largest circulation local newspaper, "Workers' Way," supported the Union State for different reasons. Smolensk, lying at the crossroads of Russia and Europe, had suffered innumerable invasions and had been "humiliated" repeatedly by the Poles, Lithuanians, the French, and Germans. The Belarusians had also borne the brunt of those invasions. Bondarenko praised the new governor of the Smolensk region Sergey Aitufyev for making attempts to reinforce the region's relationship with Belarus immediately after he assumed office in December 2007.

Beyond Economic Ties

16. (C) Yevgeniy Zakharenkov, professor at the Smolensk State University, said that an increasing number of Belarusian students were studying in Smolensk higher education institutes and active academic exchanges among scholars were under way. Currently, Smolensk's meager transportation network provides direct connection only to Moscow and Minsk. The lack of alternate routes had further reinforced the relationship between Belarus and Smolensk.

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